

Tim Thorne. *A Letter to Egon Kisch.*

Launceston: Cornford Press, 2007.

ISBN 978-0-646-47154-9

David Blencowe

Allow me to set the scene. An author, famed for his journalism and political engagement (including known communist sympathies), is invited by a group of peace activists to come to Melbourne and speak at a congress they are holding. Upon arrival the author is promptly refused entry to Australia, although he has the appropriate visa. He has not technically committed an offence, but the federal government is concerned by what he might say at the peace congress, and is worried that it could offend the sensibilities of a certain world power as well as give credence to a cause to which the government is antipathetic. The government is determined to deport him at whatever cost, the Attorney-General declaring to the media that the man in question “would not set foot on the soil of the Australian Commonwealth.” Sound like another episode in Howard’s Australia, with the government eager to stamp out the possibility of sedition coming from a foreign intellectual, who might criticise our ally, the USA, like Scott Parkin? It is not, but rather the welcome that greeted the Czech Egon Kisch upon his coming to Australia as the invited guest of the Movement Against War and Fascism. The year was 1934, the Attorney-General was not Phillip Ruddock but Robert Menzies, and the world power whose offence the government wished to prevent was none other than Nazi Germany.

The government was ultimately unsuccessful in its attempts to deport Kisch, and far from denying him public exposure and keeping the profile of his cause to a minimum, the Kisch incident became a major news story both in Australia and abroad. Things escalated early when Kisch, after be-

ing confined to ship and refused permission to land, leapt from the deck railing onto the pier below in front of the gathered media, onlookers and supporters. The drop was some six metres and he broke his leg in the process, but managed to get to his feet and take one agonising step before collapsing in a bundle of pain. Kisch had made a mockery Menzies' stern prediction that he would never set foot on Commonwealth soil, and endeared himself to the Australian public through his defiance.

More drama lay ahead for Kisch as he was whisked away by police to face a dictation test, in Scottish Gaelic of all things, a cynical employment of the White Australia policy where new arrivals could be tested for proficiency in any European language. Nevertheless Kisch and his supporters eventually prevailed in the courts, and he spent most of the four months he stayed in Australia a free man, hobbling around on crutches with his leg in plaster. He was able to travel the length of the country, speaking to many audiences, despite being prevented from addressing the congress he had come for in the first place. Upon his return to Europe he published a book entitled *Australian Landfall (Landung in Australien)*, written in the style of literary reportage for which Kisch was famous. This is an excellent book, a minor masterpiece even, and it is to be strongly recommended for its wry humour and penetrating insights into Australian life, circa 1934.

That what befell Kisch could happen in contemporary Australia (in Scott Parkin's case it did, and he was even refused his day in court), and indeed, that the Howard government's behaviour would have been worse than their 1930s predecessors, is one conclusion to be drawn from Thorne's book, *A Letter to Egon Kisch*.

Thorne's is a volume of rhymed, metered verse, taking Kisch as its silent interlocutor. Ostensibly Thorne seeks to update Kisch on modern Australia, and he does this by providing a brief account of federal politics since Kisch's time. He introduces certain "mod cons" such as mobile phones, computers, the Internet and Email and describes the commercialisation of sport. He makes the obligatory joke about Shane Warne and infelicitous text messages. Thorne's real aim, however, is to viciously lampoon Anglo-Australia, its delusions and smugness, while apportioning much of the blame for its excesses at the feet of Howard (who Thorne occasionally refers to as the Lying Little Rat, or LLR for short) and the spin doctors of a conservative media. Thorne's name proves most fitting and *A Letter to Egon Kisch* is a poetic polemic, make no mistake. Its cover is a striking hot pink, as if Thorne is keen to pre-empt dismissals of his work that reduce it to the hackneyed phrase, "a commie pinko rant."

Thorne wants to show that the racist impulses that allowed the White Australia policy to survive for such a long time are still with us today, but

that they are submerged under a hypocrisy of political correctness. Despite the establishment of a broad multicultural society Thorne contends that what it means to be truly Australian is a racial question, decided literally by the colour of your skin, although it could never be couched in those terms. Thorne writes:

Ah, there's the rub: the rub of 15+.
 We lie around on beaches to get tanned,
 but underneath the skin what makes us us
 is our essential whiteness. Dinkum Aussies
 get their dark skins from lying on the sand
 wearing not much except the briefest cossies.
 Bronzed and bonzer! You don't qualify,
 if it comes naturally. You have to try. (33.)

The defeat of the republic in the referendum and the stubborn maintenance of the flag with its Union Jack in the corner are seen by Thorne as further evidence of this latent White Australianism. He gleefully scorns patriotic fervour, observing that every true flag needs a soubriquet (like the Stars and Stripes), so he dubs ours the "Cronulla Cape", which every "racist rat-bag" can drape across their shoulders (32).

One of the most potent and hilarious passages in *A Letter to Egon Kisch* occurs when Thorne caricatures Anzac day. He observes that Gallipoli, long thought of as a sacred patch of Australian ground in the Dardanelles, is now attracting its fair share of young back-packer pilgrims. They tend to drink and be merry on the beach during Anzac eve, rather than wait in solemnity for the dawn service.

Footballs and frisbees fly where shells once flew.
 The party's on till dawn while the remains
 buried beneath this holy barbecue,
 their peace so shattered that they might revive
 and in response to the arousing strains
 of the Bee Gees' anthem 'Stayin' Alive',
 burst forth, don't quite. In future years
 the Bee Gees will give way to Britney Spears

and then we'll see the Anzacs resurrected.
 They'll think they're back in Cairo and on leave.
 The Turks might think they're getting what's expected
 from death in war against the infidel.
 Dead friend and dead foe both will then believe
 that after what they went through in this hell
 on earth the reward has fallen rather short:
 to see and hear just one good-looking sort. (15-16.)

Thorne's most venomous barbs are reserved for Howard and the media. There are Orwellian overtones in his characterisation of the unholy alliance into which both have entered. The Coalition practices a politics of fear, while, under the cover of the "War on Terror", it steadily erodes democracy and the potential for criticism through anti-sedition laws (55-56). Media spin is the equivalent of double-speak, leading to the demolition of language while acting as the government's mouthpiece, selling its policies through lies and disinformation (56). Thorne rages against what he sees as the terrible abuses of power that are happening right in front of us, and he is inconsolable in his fury.

Given that Thorne is addressing Kisch, a comparison between their two works on Australia is tempting. Kisch was an outsider who knew very little about Australia before his arrival, but quickly absorbed much during his short stay, making observations that have lost none of their insight or amusement today. He was a sympathetic and adroit observer, often letting his subjects do the talking, allowing the idiosyncrasies and absurdities of Australian life to come to the surface of their own accord. This makes his account of the government's case against him even more damning in its farcical unfolding. There is, on the other hand, nothing sympathetic about Thorne's tone. It is as one-sided as that of the conservative media columnists he has in his sights, mentioning both Albrechtsen and Bolt by name (47). Is he preaching to the converted? Certainly he seems less concerned about persuading those who may not share his views, which would include the mainstream of Australia, as masterfully ridiculing them. But there is no denying the skill and inventiveness by which Thorne crafts his poetry, sticking to metered rhyme throughout while achieving some splendid, memorable images and witty slurs. *A Letter to Egon Kisch* serves, ultimately, as a forceful and disgusted voice of dissent. Its outrage is perhaps fuelled more by a sense of the futility of calling for change in the culture of modern Australia than with any prospect of its attainability.

Thorne's book is to be recommended as a wilfully skewed but legitimate portrait of Australia in 2007. Hopefully, alongside provoking debate about Australian values in general, it will also renew interest in the work of Egon Kisch and the peculiar events surrounding his arrival here. They could just as easily occur again today.

*Monash University
dwble11@fastmail.fm*